

# Lament, the Day of the Lord is Near

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[ 0 : 00 ] 75. Now don't get too alarmed just yet. This plague of locusts is not too severe. There are only 10 to 20 locusts per square metre.

And in a severe plague, you can get 1,000 locusts per square metre, which I think means that you can't really see anything. It blots out the sky and the sun and light.

Malcolm Campbell, who is apparently the Victorian member of the Australian Plague Locust Commission, that is, I think they commission locust plagues and send them around, so you want to get into his good books, I should imagine.

His comment is that this is a fluke that they are so far south. A fluke. Well, is it a fluke? Or is it perhaps the judgement of God on Wallen, if not Melbourne?

And how do we read the things like the drought in our country? Is that a fluke? Is it the great God El Nino? Is it the God of the Bible bringing judgement on our country?

[ 1 : 08 ] Is it just part of the natural ups and downs of rain and lack of rain? How do we read these sorts of natural signs, the calamities, the disasters, the strifes, the problems that our world faces?

Are they flukes? Or is the hand of God at work in them? If so, how do we respond? Well, let us pray as we come to this part of the Bible, the book of Joel this morning, and see what God has to say about things like this.

O God, our Heavenly Father, you're the sovereign God of the universe, and you speak to us in the Scriptures so clearly.

We pray today that you'll open our eyes, our hearts, our minds, and our ears, that we may not only hear your word and understand it, but live it out.

And we pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, our locust threat is not too severe.

[ 2 : 24 ] And I imagine that in Wallen, there are probably the old-timers, the people who are very ancient, who are sitting around saying to their great-grandchildren, and to anyone else who might listen, and to anyone who won't listen, that it's nowhere near as bad as the great locust plague of 47, or something like that.

You know those old-timers who always look back and say, this is not as bad. You know, you remember the great fires of 39, or the great floods of 42, or the great war of 14 to 18, or the great tea trolley disaster of 66, or 67, or whenever it was.

The locust plague that the prophet Joel and his people were confronted with was unparalleled. Joel writes in verse 2, Hear this, O elders.

That is, really, the old people of society. He's saying, you who've got the longest memories and can think back as far as anyone else can, listen to this.

And for all of you, he then says in verse 2, give ear all inhabitants of the land. Has such a thing happened in your days or in the days of your ancestors? And the implied answer is no.

[ 3 : 36 ] Never before has there been a locust plague like the one that Joel and his contemporaries are facing at the time when he is given these words and writes this book. Not only never before has it happened, but implicit is never again will it happen to this severity.

So he says in verse 3, Tell your children of it, let your children tell their children, and their children another generation. That is, not only has this never happened before as bad as it is now, but never again will it happen so bad.

So the next generation will tell the next generation so that in a few generations' time, the old-timers will be saying, I remember the great locust plague in the time of Joel back in whatever year it was.

And they'll be telling their great-grandchildren and their great-great-great-grandchildren and so on.

And you can imagine the little tackers coming up to great-grandpapa Ezekiel or something and sitting on his knee and saying, Tell us the story again about that great locust plague.

And he'll probably get out his version of Joel to remind him some of the details if he doesn't know it off by heart. And he'll say, Never before was there a locust plague like this. Never again has there been a locust plague like this.

[ 4 : 50 ] And this is what it was like. The land was thoroughly desolate. What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust ate. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust ate.

What the hopping locust left, the destroying locust ate. It's almost like a little rhyme or children's song you can imagine. Pretty gloomy picture though. A bit unclear exactly whether these are different types of locusts or just a poetic way of saying swarm after swarm of locusts came. Normally if you get a great big locust plague, there's nothing left for the next swarm of locusts to come. But the implication of that verse 4 is that there really is, in the end, absolutely nothing left. A bad locust plague destroys the lot. Everything that's green, it eats. And half the plants that aren't green as well. So this swarm of cutting locusts, swarming locusts, hopping locusts, destroying locusts, is probably a poetic, figurative sort of way of saying there's nothing left.

The land was desolate. This was almost like total destruction. It's an especially grave and sombre and solemn description of that locust plague.

[ 6 : 00 ] Though we don't know when these events occurred. The book of Joel unusually just tells us this is the word of the Lord that came to Joel, son of Petheol, in verse 1. But it doesn't say in the reign of this king or that king, like many of the other prophets do.

We don't know whether this is 600 BC, 700 BC, maybe 400 BC. In the end, of course, the date doesn't matter. If it did, we'd be told. Joel's not tied to any particular date, although the events probably were real and in a particular time.

But in a sense, it reminds us that his work of the kings or the priests or the leaders first, or even the rich. The first group of people that he addresses about this issue of the locust plague are the alcoholics, the winos, the down-and-outs.

See what verse 5 says. Wake up, you drunkards, and weep, and wail all you wine drinkers over the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth. You see, if a locust plague comes and it takes, amongst other things, all of the grape crop and vine, the first people who will be hardest hit will be the albies.

No drink. They'll suffer. And notice how it says, wake up, you drunkards. Come on, rouse yourself to see what's going on here. This is more than just a lack of another bottle of drink.

[ 7 : 17 ] Maybe implicit here, though, in addressing the alcoholics first is not just saying to them, you know, you're the ones who are suffering first, but is maybe by implication saying to all the people of society for whom these words are recorded, your spiritual state is as though you're drunk, you're complacent, you're not alert to what's going on.

Pay attention. Be alert. Observe and hear these words. And then he describes this locust plague as though the nation is being invaded by another nation.

Verse 6 says, For a nation has invaded my land, powerful and innumerable, its teeth are lion's teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness. Now that may be figurative language just to describe the severity of the locust plague, although many people think that it's describing a real invasion and that locusts are actually figurative language to describe an enemy invasion.

Maybe it's actually both that are going on. Certainly it seems to me the language about the locusts seems real language, but maybe there's also some enemy invasion at least threatened. The ancient empire of Assyria had as one of their symbols great big statues of lions.

Maybe that's implicit. At the end of verse 6 when it tells about this nation invading its teeth are lion's teeth. Or maybe it's just saying the severity of this locust plague is as if the teeth of these little insect locusts are like lion's teeth because they're ripping apart everything in front of it.

[ 8 : 46 ] See what verse 7 says? It has laid waste my vines and splintered my fig trees. It's stripped off their bark and thrown it down. Their branches have turned white. That is, there's very little left. Well, that's the first call in effect to be alert and wail what's going on.

Address to the alcoholics, although recorded here for everybody to read. Notice that the land that is suffering is God's land. God says it is my land in verse 6 that a nation has invaded.

In verse 7, it's laid waste my vines. In verse 8, it's splintered my fig trees. It is God's land, fundamentally, not the people's. And it is God's land that is suffering.

Well, next, Joel addresses someone who, it seems, is a woman. One woman. Verse 8 says, lament, like a virgin dressed in sackcloth for the husband of her youth.

The virgin is betrothed. Her husband, it seems, has gone away, not come back, has died. She's lamenting his death, that she was never married to him, just betrothed to him.

[ 9 : 57 ] The word lament is addressed to a single woman. It's a feminine singular in the Hebrew language in which this was originally written. Most people think that probably what it's addressing is the city of Jerusalem, the capital city.

Cities were often addressed in terms of being female, and that's probably what's being addressed here, the city dwellers, because in the next verse it goes on to say things about the temple which was in Jerusalem and the lack of the offerings that were there.

But notice the depth of grief and lament that is to be expressed because of this locust plague. This is not just sort of a little difficulty in the agricultural economy.

This is severe. They are to grieve like a woman who's lost her betrothed husband to be. That's how severe the grief, the wailing, the lamenting is to be over this locust plague.

Verse 9 says that the grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the Lord. In the house of the Lord, the temple in Jerusalem, there were all sorts of different sacrifices that would be offered.

[ 11 : 05 ] Not only animal sacrifices for atonement for sin, but also some drink offerings and grain offerings that would be offered and part of those offerings would be to provide food for the priests who operated and ministered in the temple in Jerusalem.

They're all cut off. They're cut off because there's no supplies of grain and oil and wine. When those things have dried up so severe has this locust plague been or this enemy invasion been that the temple supplies are gone.

No longer can the daily operation of the temple continue and the implications of that are significant because it's saying that the relationship between God and his people is grinding to a halt in effect.

They're not able to offer him what he commands them to offer. The grain offerings, the wine offerings and so on, the drink offerings. This is a very severe situation and these words are addressed it seems to the city dwellers of Jerusalem in which the temple exists.

No wonder the priests mourn as the end of verse 9 says, the ministers of the Lord. They're mourning their lack of work, they're mourning their lack of food as well. The fields are devastated, the ground mourns for the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil fails.

[ 12 : 21 ] That's a particularly sombre verse. As somebody says about it in its original language, it's loaded with leaden letters, short, sharp statements that are like tolling the death knell.

Verse 10, the fields are devastated, the ground mourns, the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil fails.

It's grinding to death and it's grinding to a halt in a very solemn verse. The promised land is no longer flowing with milk and honey.

Grain, wine and oil were the staples of their society as the end of verse 10 describes them. The basics are gone. That's how severe this is. The things that were meant to be part of the blessing of the promised land, no more.

And for those who knew their scriptures, those who've got ears to hear and eyes to see, they ought to realise the significance of what's going on. Because earlier in their scriptures, in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, it was abundantly clear that when the wine, the grain and the oil dried up and were gone, it was a clear sign of what are called the curses of the covenant coming on the land.

[ 13 : 39 ] And they would only come as God's judgement against the disobedience of his people. If they obeyed, Leviticus and Deuteronomy said, your land will be blessed, it will be peaceful and prosperous and wine will flow and oil will flow and the grain will be plentiful.

But if you disobey the commandments of God, then these things will be no more. In fact, your land will be invaded by enemies and locusts, in fact, are part of those covenant curses in those early chapters of the Bible.

So here what Joel is implying by his description is you ought to understand what's going on here. This is not a fluke.

It is God's judgement coming. Next he addresses the rural folk. Having addressed the alcoholics and the city dwellers of Jerusalem, now the rural folk, the farmers.

Verse 11, Be dismayed, you farmers. Wail, you vine dresses, over the wheat and the barley for the crops of the field are ruined. The vine withers, the fig tree droops. Pomegranate, palm from which

you get dates, an apple, all the trees of the field are dried up.

[14:49] All the lovely things that Israel is even still noted for today, gone, dried up, maybe more than a locust plague, maybe implying drought as well. This is severe, a massive crop failure throughout the land.

And the result at the end of verse 12 is surely joy withers away among the people as the fruit, the grain, the wine, the oil, as it withers away, so joy withers away.

Joy which is to be expressed regularly as part of the ongoing relationship of God and his people, gone. Finally, Joel addresses the priests, the religious leaders, in Jerusalem.

Verse 13 and 14. Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests. Wail, you ministers of the altar. Come past the night in sackcloth, you ministers of my God. Grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God.

Sanctify a fast. Call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord, your God and cry out to the Lord.

[16:03] Maybe here addressing the priests not only as the moral leaders in order to bring people to their knees before God and pray, maybe there's a hint of blame that they've failed to do their duty thus far. This disaster calls for extreme measures.

A solemn fast, a gathering, an assembly of all the people of the land to gather to the house of the Lord. And even though the sacrifices are cut off because of the lack of supplies, they can still pray.

And that is what they're called to do, to cry out to the Lord in prayer. Because what Joel is acknowledging in those words there is that this is not just a natural disaster, it's not just the ebbs and the flows of rain and lack of rain and drought and locusts and so on.

In which case you've just got to bide your time and wait for it to get better. No, you see, Joel recognises here that behind this is God, the God of the universe.

the God of the creation. And if God has had a hand in these affairs then God is also the source of relief and hope. To him the people are called to pray.

[17:09] Because Joel is acknowledging God's hand. This is more than a fluke. It's not just a natural disaster. God is involved.

The Old Testament people of God looked forward to a particular day called the Day of the Lord.

And on that Day of the Lord they anticipated that their enemies would be finally quashed, they would be vindicated and lifted up, their land would be restored, it would be peaceful and prosperous, the Kingdom of God would be ushered in, they would dwell in security forever, their borders would be protected forever, it would be heaven on earth we might say, and it would be the Messiah, the Anointed One who would come and bring all that to its fulfilment.

That was their big hope through the Old Testament and many of the prophets expressed that hope in differing ways, looking forward to that great day when finally the people of God would be secure under God's hand in his land.

But now the prophet Joel turns that expectation on its head. Instead of anticipating and yearning for and longing for a great day, he says in verse 15, alas for the day, the day of the Lord is near.

Alas, the day they thought would be their jubilation, their vindication, their hope, their joy. Now the prophet says, alas for that day of the Lord, the day of the Lord is near.

[18:35] It's a day of destruction, verse 15 says, not a day of joy as they expect. You see, Joel understands that these events of locust plague and drought and maybe enemy invasion, they're not flukes, but rather they are portents or harbingers of the day of the Lord yet to come.

A day that will bring to these people not joy, but judgment and destruction. Because Joel understands by the word of the Lord to him and then through him to the people, that these are not just natural events.

They're not explained by el nino effects and so on. It is the hand of God at work in them. And they are warning signs of the day of the Lord to come. And as these locust plagues and droughts are severe, crippling the nation, bringing it, it ought to be, to its knees, they are warnings of worse things to come.

The day of the Lord no less. Alas for that day! Not rejoice in it, the way Israel is now. That is, Joel is implying that this locust plague, this drought, this fire yet to be described, maybe this enemy invasion, they are signs of God's judgment, warning signs.

of the final judgment day yet to come. He goes on to describe what he's in effect already described, what is obvious, he's saying in effect, look at this, see it before your eyes, you must understand

what's happening here.

[ 20 : 03 ] Is not the food cut off before our eyes? Joy and gladness from the house of our God? You ought to know what that means, a sign of the judgment of God. Verse 17, the seed shrivels under the clods.

You try and plant your grain and your vines and so on, and the seed just dies dry in the land that is baked not only from the sun and the drought, but baked by God's judgment under the clods of earth that have no water to bring the seeds to germination.

The storehouses are desolate and the granaries are ruined because the grain has failed. Those buildings, land, stand idle and empty, falling apart, desolate, empty, nothing in it, nothing stored. It's all gone. It is a sign of the judgment of God, Joel is saying. You ought to see this, you ought to know this. But by implication at least, the people do not.

They are like drunks in a spiritual stupor and Joel is calling them to wake up, to rouse themselves. You ought to be able to understand you should know your scriptures.

[ 21 : 14 ] The descriptions of what's happening here are almost as though they're lifted out of those earlier parts of the Bible. You ought to know that these are the curses of the covenant. You ought to know therefore that it's because of your disobedience.

But they don't. Why even dumb animals are crying out to God, he says in verse 18. How the animals groan, the herds of cattle wander about because there's no pasture for them, even the flocks of sheep are dazed.

And then if you look to verse 20, even the wild animals, cry to you, God. And Joel, by implication, is saying, you people of God here, you're in the midst of a locust plague, a drought, maybe an enemy invasion, and you're not doing anything about it.

You're not calling out to God. You're walking around blindly as though you're spiritually drunk and complacent. Even the bulls and sheep are crying out to God. But you senseless people of God, get to your knees and pray, is what he's implying in these words.

And Joel himself leads the lament in verse 19. To you, O Lord, I cry. We don't know what he says at this point yet, but he leads the way.

[ 22 : 27 ] The prophet, under the word of God, crying to God. A word of lament. For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flames have burned all the trees of the field.

Even the wild animals cry to you because the watercourses are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness. The repetition of the expressions lends solemnity to the words.

Fire is often a symbol of the judgment of God in the scriptures. By implication, the same is occurring here. Not natural events, but the hand of God in judgment against his people.

How then do we read these sorts of events when they occur in our world? How do we respond when we read that a locust plague, maybe not severe, is on the edge of Melbourne?

How do we understand it when Australia still seems to be in such drought? How do we respond when around the world there are bushfires and floods and droughts and earthquakes and volcanoes erupting and those sorts of so-called natural events?

[ 23 : 46 ] What a shame. Might get better next year. What do those events force us to God? Is it a fluke?

Or is it the hand of God at work? Or we as a nation, like ancient Israel, call here, have a solemn assembly, a day of fasting, a national day of lament?

It may not be quite so simple. Ancient Israel, ancient Judah, the people of God here in the Old Testament, were set apart from the other nations of the ancient world to be God's special possession, in a special land that he set apart for them, a land of promise.

That land, that people, they were especially God's people in the Old Testament. We can't simply lift out from that nation to any other nation of the modern world and say, well, for that nation they had to do that, therefore we should as a nation do such and such.

Indeed, the lines of continuity from ancient Israel lead to the church more than to the nations of our world, by and large. Maybe we should as a church respond more readily to such things in our society.

[ 24 : 59 ] Having said that though, we must not miss the signs, the warning signs. Jesus teaches that not every calamity does disaster, earthquake, whatever, tower collapsing, is directly the judgment of God against a particular person or group's sins and failures.

But those events are, in general sense, because of the fallen nature of our world. When the first people in the Bible failed and disobeyed God and didn't trust his word, the ground was cursed because of that.

And ever since then, these natural disasters of fires and floods and earthquakes and volcanoes and locust plagues and the like, are in a general sense because of our fallen world.

And because, as its cause, human sinfulness. A locust plague on Melbourne may not directly be God's judgment on a city, but is, at least in a general sense, a sign of a fallen world, a sinful human nature that each one of us has.

But as Jesus taught, as Joel teaches, as the Bible as a whole teaches, these are all to be warning signs for us. That as we observe these sorts of events in our world and in our society, they ought to stir us to turn to God.

[ 26 : 23 ] Whether or not it's a direct act of judgment against a nation, or whether perhaps more likely against a church, they are certainly general warning signs for the whole of our world, really, that God is God and that we're to come before him on our knees and pray and lament and as we'll see next week, repent and turn from our sins.

Every calamity, every natural disaster is a warning sign for us of a day that is yet to come. The day of the Lord, no less. The day when the Jesus Christ, who rose from the tomb as we celebrated last Sunday and ascended later to heaven at God's right hand, when that same Jesus will return and every eye will see him and he'll come in judgment on this world and every person will be brought before him and their lives brought to account before his throne, that throne of judgment.

So every earthquake and every locust plague and every drought and every fire and every disaster and calamity and grief and strife that we face national scale, international scale, personal scale, is a warning sign of that final judgment day, stirring us to readiness for that day when we face Jesus, when every knee will finally bow before him, the Lord of all, the Son of God Almighty.

So then as we face these sorts of events, we individually as a church certainly are called to reflect, is God teaching me something here?

Is he rebuking me here for my life, for my spiritual drunkenness and complacency? Is he urging me with a wake-up call to be ready for that final day?

[ 28 : 19 ] Because if I'm caught unawares then, it's too late. Are these events then calling me to examine my life before God? To turn from my sins?

To turn back to God? Surely that's what Joel is urging on us here. Though we no longer be the nation of the people of God as ancient Israel was, individually and corporately as a church within the nations of the world in general, these events in the world bring us to our knees before God, to cry out to him and as we'll see next week more clearly, to turn from our sins and turn to God.

God. And for those who do that, as the scriptures so eloquently and joyfully attest, forgiveness of sins is real because Jesus died and rose.

And those whose sins are forgiven in him will stand before him on that final judgment day without fear but with confidence, a confidence placed in the Saviour and not in the self.

For those who will be baptised shortly and for those of us who are Christians and believers and are baptised, then we know that we've turned from our sins and received the forgiveness of God offered in Jesus who died and rose, the same Jesus who is coming again to judge our world.

[ 29 : 51 ] Amen. God's mercy, round Jesus who died andomas saliva, the wonderful world, you know, our world water, and the - andena Wind love us.

What's doing with God's mercy indulgence?